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ALGERIA BY CLAUSEWITZ

They were all there : Jomini looking important, Liddell Hart with his bow-tie, very academic, Sun Tzu just how we imagined him, wearing a simple black worn-out robe and a thin, white beard, and of course Clausewitz, with uniform and lambchops just as in his biography.

I lost no time pondering on the weird nature of the encounter, and went straight to Karl, who was sitting on his own.

IF- May I ?

KC - Please.

IF- Are you still in business ?

KC - What do you mean ?

IF- Do you still work on strategy ?

KC - One does not lose one's habits easily, I suppose.

IF- I wonder.. You see, I have a paper to write for the National War College, and I am supposed to use your concepts.

KC - Condolences ! I mean, good idea ! What is the problem ?

IF- Well...I hope you will not take offense, but I have a hard time understanding some of what you wrote, and I also find it difficult to match what I understood with the subject I

chose, the French Algerian war. Would you have a little time to spare ?

KC (smiling) - I have eternity. And I am not surprised you find me difficult to understand; I sometimes get mixed up myself. Where do you want to start ?

IF- Probably with the type of war it was.

KC - It is indeed important to know what kind of war you are engaged in, especially from your adversary's point of view, because his commitment and his will to fight are in direct proportion with his interests; you have, most of the time, a good idea of his economic, human and military resources. It is far more difficult to asses how much of these resources he is determined to use.

Before we go any further, I must remind you that I introduced the notion of "total war" because it was fashionable, in the days and country of Emmanuel Kant, to relate every "object" to an "idea". So "total war" is an abstract, philosophical and somewhat artificial concept, and you should neither try to find a total war in the real world, nor spend much time on the concept itself.

That being said, I guess the Algerians were fairly close to what is generally understood as total war, since they were fighting for their very existence. However, the concept does not fit well because one finds neither the resources nor the actors that are to use them : there is no government since there is no state, and a temporary and unofficial government¹ will be established only in 1958; there is no military organization to start with, only a few leaders and a handful of followers; and you cannot even say you had a people, for there had never been an Algerian nation, and moreover the Algerians were divided, through

¹GPRA, *Gouvernement provisoire de la Republique Algerienne*
(Temporary Government of the Algerian Republic)

the entire conflict, between those who favored independence and those who opposed it, not counting the great number who did not care or understand. This was not, by the way, an unusual situation: most revolutions are actively supported by only a small minority of the population.

For France, it was certainly a very limited war : motherland was not in danger, and the idea that Algeria was part of France had always been a little farfetched, although not more so, I suppose, than Tahiti or ... Hawaii. Even though the oil of the Sahara was valuable for the country, nothing vital depended on keeping Algeria in French hands. However, several generations of men and women, established in the country since 1830, had not only lived there all their lives but greatly developed the area, raising it to a level of prosperity that, incidentally, also profited many Algerians.

In a way, one could say it was really a civil war, since from beginning to end you had French fighting French and Algerians killing Algerians.

IF- You probably know how much we insist on your view that the use of military force is just one among many political tools, and that it should always stay submitted to political objectives. What were the political objectives in this case ?

KC - For the FLN², who started the fighting in 1954, it was always clear and simple : they wanted the French to leave and Algeria to become an independent nation. But for the French, it was both unclear and evolutionary. In the early stages, it probably appeared to be a mere problem of internal order. But very soon the prospect of independence surfaced. And from 1958 on, with the arrival of General de Gaulle, the objective changed to exactly the

²*Front de Liberation Nationale*; National Liberation Front

opposite, the General being convinced that the interest of France was to let Algeria go its own way. Although he said exactly the contrary when he arrived in office, the records show that he had long determined it was the thing to do. As early as 1944, and to give only one example, de Gaulle told one of his ministers who was suggesting autonomy for Algeria : " Autonomy ? You know very well that all this will finish with independence "³

IF- I suppose it does not make things easy, especially for the military, to change so radically one's political objectives.

KC - Well ! Setting a course and keeping it is fine as long as you are not heading towards the rocks. And changing one's objective is probably less harmful than holding on to a bad one. It takes wisdom and courage, but that is what the people expect from the politicians. General de Gaulle certainly believed that the cost of reestablishing control over Algeria and then supporting it exceeded the capabilities of France, which had commitments in Europe, trying to promote some kind of European community, and was also building up its own nuclear "*force de frappe*".

But you are right, sharp course alterations generally have a price. In this case, it hurt the French Armed Forces very badly. Understandably, they had felt let down in Indochina; in Algeria they felt betrayed, this time with the added burden of having betrayed, in turn, the Algerians who had placed their faith in France. And remember, the men who were in Algeria were the same who, only four years earlier, had left Indochina !

IF- What about your "trinity" ? How does that notion of the necessary cohesion between government, the people and the military apply to this case ?

³Pierre Montagnon, *La Guerre d'Algerie*, Pygmalion 1984, p.270

KC - Not very well, I'm afraid. The landscape is very confused on both sides. The French have a government, but it changes its objective halfway through the war, and basically disregards both the military and the people; the armed forces, as we have just seen, feels betrayed and a significant part of it ends up in open rebellion with General de Gaulle; as for the people, they are divided all along, ...and still are to-day !

The Algerian picture is even worse. There never was a real government, but only, after a time, a few "leading" structures, none of which ever was a command tool. The GPRA, self-appointed and working from abroad, mainly Cairo, was however very useful, and successful, in obtaining support for the Algerian cause on the international scene. The fighting arm of the movement consisted of groups of "freedom-fighters", loosely organized and sometimes even fighting each other. As for the people, they were so divided that 200,000 of them were executed by the ALN⁴, either to "convince" others to join, or to punish them for their sympathies towards French Algeria

IF- You are certainly aware that your "center of gravity" is, with "friction", the most popular "Clausewitzian" notion in our war colleges.

KC - Probably because it is one of the less difficult to understand, although it can lead to serious mistakes, if you think of it as some magical key to success: it is generally not unique, often changes with time, and sometimes does not even exist as a targetable entity.

In this case, I would say the French did not have a clear center of gravity when the war started in 1954: government, Army and people were all fairly strong and united by the idea of keeping Algeria French. Moreover, the Algerians, with no Army and no representation

⁴ALN, *Armee de Liberation Nationale*, National Liberation Army

in the French parliament, had no other choice than to aim at the only thing that was within their reach, the French population in Algeria. Understanding the major role of passion, and counting on its frequent "snow-ball" effect, they tried to drown the French desire to stay in terror. They also used terror against their muslim brothers who opposed or only hesitated to join the "liberation movement". Military strategy matched perfectly the political objective.

From the French perspective, I guess the main Algerian center of gravity was the people, since it was in its name that the movement was created, and because the same people were supposed to provide the fighting arm. But winning the Algerian people's hearts and minds would be a long process, and would not be easy, because the reasons for discontent were both ancient and very real; relations between individuals were not bad, but the Algerians had not been treated fairly by the French authorities: their land plots were generally small and poor, they were French "subjects" but not "citizens", and therefore did not enjoy the same rights, their military service was twice as long as that of their European counterparts, and above all most of them were deliberately kept away from the educational system which enables the individual to rise in social status. Therefore, while making a few and probably insufficient reforms, the French concentrated on cutting off the armed hand of the insurgency.

IF- Do you think it was the right choice ?

KC - For the short term, yes. In fact, by 1959, the French Army had virtually defeated the rebellion in its military dimension, by totally sealing off the Algerian fighting groups from their neighbors, Tunisia and Morocco, where money and weapons came from. Si Salah, one of the main Algerian warlords, even came to Paris and tried to offer General de Gaulle a peace settlement, which the latter did not accept, because it delayed, for an unknown

period of time, his ultimate objective of an independent Algeria. Ironically, it is precisely when political and social reforms had gained sufficient breadth and intensity to really change the Algerian lives, and when at the same time the military struggle was almost won, that General de Gaulle gave the first official hint of his long term views on Algeria: " Thanks to the progress achieved in pacification, and in the social and democratic areas, we can now envisage the day when the men and the women who live in Algeria will be able to shape their own destiny.." ⁵

IF- It must have come as a terrible surprise !

KC - Especially for the Army. But one must never forget that the military is only one tool among others in the hand of the political leader. General de Gaulle explained, in his "Memoirs of hope", that he could not make public his long term plan, because very few in France were prepared for it. In a way, he was giving credit to my notion of trinity, by acknowledging that even he could not prevail over the combined weight of the people and the Army, and that he therefore had to wait until a sufficient portion of these had grown accustomed to the idea that Algerian independence was the ultimate reasonable situation.

IF- Considering all the damage that resulted for France from this war and its outcome, a humiliated Army, a divided nation, the sour taste of failure, the sense of betrayal for the Algerians that "believed in France", the impression of waste for those who lost friends or relatives on the battlefield, do you think there was a better way out of this conflict ?

KC - As a matter of fact, I do, and I also agree with your implicit sense of excessive price. I believe the French could have tried to do in Algeria what the British did in Kenya

⁵Ibid., p.298

almost at the same time: refuse to be forced out, restore order, and then set out on the road to independence, in cooperation with the Algerians. For General de Gaulle was right to think that France and Algeria should eventually part. The difference of cultures between christian Europeans and mostly Arab muslims, the demographic trends of the two communities, the general move of former colonies towards independence, the challenges in Europe, many elements combined to make the status quo untenable in the long run.

IF- Well, I don't want to take any more of your time, and I want to thank you: now my paper will be far better, since it will have come from the horse's mouth, if you forgive me this common expression.

KC - The horse was glad to help. But I feel my ideas did not fit too well with this conflict. Why don't you go over and talk about it with our friend Liddell Hart; his notion of dislocation and insistence on looking beyond war to the subsequent peace would fit nicely.

IF- Thanks, I'll...think about it.